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Chapter 16: Anthropology, Archaeology and African Studies: Some thoughts on theory, stuff and the possibilities of a new Afro-centrism

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Some years ago I heard, on the grapevine, that an anthropology colleague of mine (not an Africanist) had claimed, in a moment of indiscretion, that nothing good had come out of Africanist anthropology for fifty years. At the time this jaded comment - regardless of whether in fact it was ever made or made in the way I remember it now - fed into my own growing concerns about the marginalization of Africanist anthropology in the discipline as whole. In a small but unpleasant way it seemed to mirror the prejudices and patronizing undertones still often marking populist representations of Africa beyond the continent, in the same way that in some registers African studies is still largely, or perhaps more than ever, understood as equivalent to development studies (see MacEachern, this volume). But for me these concerns also coalesced with deeper anxieties about the perceived place of theory in African studies more broadly and, in particular, a widening caricature of the 'derivative' nature of Africanist scholarship and its perceived tendency to deploy theoretical perspectives emergent from elsewhere, rather than forging new perspectives based on empirical African realities. These wider concerns were not mine alone, and have usefully fed into various new collaborative ventures focusing attention on the need for more critical debate and reflection in African studies, so that Africanists can 'generate their own lines of enquiry ... and open up new frontiers of cutting-edge research' (Nugent 2009:2) and in the process return 'Africanist

scholarship to the heart of theoretical innovation within each of its constituent disciplines' (Fontein 2012:6).¹ At the same time a parallel, and increasingly acknowledged concern, has been highlighting and supporting the critical role of African scholars within African studies, a field of knowledge production still largely dominated by universities and scholars in 'the north', for want of a better expression. This volume is a very welcome contribution to this agenda, bringing to the table not only the critical inputs African scholars are making to debates in African archaeology in particular, but also the African 'roots' of archaeological theory-making writ large.

Upon reflection, my colleague's caustic comment probably also reflects one side of a rather peculiar tension between 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal' forces marking British anthropology in late 20th and early 21st centuries; between, on the one hand, an ever-narrowing set of theoretical, thematic, and methodological foci steering the discipline towards an increasingly exclusivist 'centre'; and on the other, a broadening intellectual engagement with ideas, theories and tools emergent from related disciplines and other intellectual genres on its more creative 'peripheries'. Among the peculiarities of this recurrent but shifting tension in social anthropology is the rather odd association of particular theoretical strands with particular ethnographic regionalisms – so while the anthropology of the Middle East and Asia is heavily focused on religion, politics and the state, the anthropology of incommensurability, alterity and 'ontology' has been vanguarded in Papua New Guinea, Mongolia and Brazil. Africa, in anthropological terms, is now over-represented by studies of 'development', violence, ethnicity, land and (still) witchcraft, in the same way as it once was in terms of, say, kinship, colonialism, and (yes) witchcraft. These are very crude characterizations, but they are not entirely without basis. Another peculiarity of

¹ Such as *Critical African Studies*, a new journal launched from Edinburgh in 2009, which moved into the Taylor and Francis fold in 2012 (Nugent 2009; Fontein 2012).

anthropology's centrifugal/petal tensions is the rather conceited view (of 'centrepetalists' in particular) that anthropology tends mainly (and perhaps with the exception of linguistics, and more recently philosophy) to give 'its' theory (not to mention its methodologies) to the rest – other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities – and consequently has nothing to learn from a discipline like archaeology. This has sometimes resulted in the odd outcome that studies of, say, 'material culture' - or race (especially in the UK), or even more surprisingly 'gender' - are too often still seen as niche thematic foci, rather than contributing to the core of anthropological theorizing. 'Centrifugalists' have tended to take the opposite view, but their creative thinking has, as a result, too often been relegated to anthropology's margins.

In what follows, and by way of retort to my colleague's alleged comment, I engage with some of the issues raised by this volume on 'Theory in Africa' and 'Africa in theory' to consider the question of intellectual agenda-setting in African studies, and what the shifting relationship between anthropology and archaeology offers these debates. Just as 'Africa' generates and is generative of theory, and always has been, archaeology too can generate (better) theory in anthropology, as much as archaeological theory has benefitted in the past from anthropological thinking and practice.

African studies: Who sets the agenda?

The question of who studies, researches and writes about Africa, and whose writings are read as authoritative in defining our field of study, has long troubled African studies. One could argue, for example, that Malinowski's embrace of the fledgling, (and then largely unqualified) anthropologist Jomo Kenyatta in the 1930s reflected

these kinds of anxieties even then (Berman 1996). In the 2000s, there are very practical, economic and structural sides to this problem - many African universities continue to struggle to recover from the Structural Adjustment generation of the 1980s and 1990s. African studies centres, scholars, publishers and journals beyond the continent have in recent years placed increased emphasis on addressing this 'practical side' through a proliferation of writing workshops, institutional partnerships and similar schemes, which seek through modest transfers of financial and intellectual resources to offer some of the opportunities afforded to emerging scholars in 'northern' universities to their comrades in less advantaged institutions in the region. These efforts are important for levelling the crowded and uneven playing field of scholarly endeavour and recognition. Their proliferation suggests the seriousness of the situation has been recognised for what it is, or could be: a crisis of legitimacy for our field of studies. BUT this crisis of legitimacy - if that is what it is – is more profound than such levelling mechanisms could ever resolve. A key question remains: *who sets the intellectual agenda for African Studies?*

This volume enters this discussion as it relates to African archaeology from a particular standpoint. Whatever the individual role of African scholars in the development of archaeological theory, particularly the movement from the 'New' or 'processual' archaeology to its rebellious offspring, 'interpretative' or 'post-processual' archaeology – and as Wynne-Jones and Fleisher's discussion of the work of Andah, Chami and Pikirayi (this volume, p??) make clear here, African archaeologists are in no way uniform or consistent in heralding, deriding, or critically engaging with these theoretical approaches – what this volume seeks to explore is how the shift towards postprocessualism 'grew out of a body of African research' (p. 1??). It examines how 'archaeological theory has been profoundly influenced by

engagement with African ways of being and doing' (p.15?), thereby highlighting 'the reciprocal process of creating the discipline of archaeology, borne out of an interaction between Africa and the West' (p.16?). Although very important, this approach is not entirely unprecedented, and is mirrored in an emerging interest in anthropology to, for example, re-examine the research contexts of early and mid-20th century, pre-postcolonial, anthropologists such as Monica Hunter Wilson (Bank 2008; Bank & Bank 2013; Marsland 2013), or the scholars of the Rhodes-Livingston Institute (Werbner 1984), in order to highlight the role of African interpreters and research assistants in the production of some of that discipline's older canonical texts.

More recently, and controversially (Obarrio 2012; Ferguson 2012; Aravamudan 2012; Mbembe 2012; Comaroff & Comaroff 2012), a similar line of critical thinking has been pursued by the Comaroffs' seminal book *Theory from the South* (2011). Importantly, their provocation is less about 'Southern theory' per se, than the effect of 'the south' as 'concrete abstraction' (both 'real' place(s) and politically efficacious construct) on theory making at large. Despite their title, their purpose is less to reverse normative teleologies that conventionally tie 'the south' in an evolutionary bind to 'the north', than to confound those temporal/spatial schemas altogether. This might suggest, like the arguments the editors of this volume make about the African origins of contemporary archaeological theory-making, that the old problem of 'Northern' scholars framing and dominating debates about 'the South' (just as Said's *Orientalism* was orientated on an East-West axis) needs comprehensive reframing rather than resolution as such. Yet the question about who constitutes and determines the shape and form of intellectual endeavour on and about 'Africa', 'the South' (or for that matter 'the East', the 'poor', the 'working class', the 'subaltern', 'women', or any other kind of 'other') are still with us. And just as urgent. In African

studies the question of who determines intellectual agendas remains as acute as ever, however much they have been nuanced by growing recognition of the reciprocal nature of theory-making, between the ‘field’ and ‘desk’ and back again.

The editors suggest that the African roots of postprocessual archaeology – especially the ‘focus on materiality, agency and social practice derived from African societies’ which ‘lies at the heart of the turn towards meaning-centred archaeologies’ (p. 15??) - are particularly apparent in the multifaceted but uneven significance of ‘ethno-archaeology’ and its rival half-sibling ‘indigenous archaeology’. But neither are unproblematic. The former faces various dangers inherent to theorizing by direct analogy, as epitomised in my mind by the Huffman/Beach debates about the Venda and Great Zimbabwe in the 1980s and 1990s (Huffman 1984; Beach 1998). However nuanced in its articulation, ethno-archaeology will always risk binding current ethnographic observations with or to past practices and meanings reconstituted through very particular engagements with the past’s material immanence, and vice versa, thereby threatening to re-forge notions of the ‘timeless Other’ long bedevilling scholarship on the continent (Fabian 1983). Closing certain temporal distances hazards falsely concretising other ‘spatial’, ‘cultural’ and perhaps ‘ontological’ differences.

‘Indigenous archaeology’, on the other hand, builds out of postcolonial critique of all archaeology as necessarily rooted in a colonial gaze or ordering of knowledge, and seeks to counter this by looking for other ‘indigenous’ ways of dealing with and encountering the past and its remains. By positing a rupture between mainstream archaeological theory as necessarily ‘western’ and ‘hegemonic’, and ‘resistant’, ‘alternative’ and usually ‘local’ ways of dealing with or engaging the stuff of the past, the promotion of ‘indigenous archaeologies’ not only has the ‘sad effect’

of ‘forgetting African input into “western” theory’, it also has the ‘unintended consequence of [again] othering the very people that it seeks to empower’ (this volume p.16?). Because the promotion of ‘indigenous archaeologies’ in the discipline as whole has tended to look beyond the boundaries of academia (particularly in other parts of the globe), when applied to African contexts it risks ignoring the critical engagements of African scholars with archaeological theorizing (cf. Lane 2011). African archaeologists can consequently appear caught in a very tricky place, either too ‘derivative’ in their theorizing, inevitably and imperfectly following the meaning-makers of ‘the North’, or not ‘indigenous’ and ‘local’ enough to constitute a radical challenge to them; condemned to appear neither ‘etic’ nor ‘emic’ enough (cf. Fontein 2010). The apparent paradox this volume’s editors allude to, of postprocessual theory deriving from archaeology/ethno-archaeology done in Africa, yet rejected as vague, incoherent, unscientific, or inappropriate by many African scholars, points exactly to this problematic positionality.

These problems to do with the place of African archaeology in the discipline reflect the urgent issue of legitimacy facing African studies as a whole. Where could an ‘authentic’ African intellectualism reside that does not re-concretize problematic differences between ‘etic’ and ‘emic’ theorizing and knowledge production, and yet still foster possibility for radical, alternative ways of thinking and doing? Or in terms specific to this volume’s concerns, of encountering and constituting multiple pasts and their remains? This is a political as much as an analytical question, and perhaps where the two coincide. The days of Senghor and Césaire’s *Négritude* movement, Fanon’s (1961) reflections on the *Wretched of the Earth*, the optimism of 1960s Pan-Africanism and African-socialism, of Nkrumah’s (1980) *Consciencism* and Nyerere’s (1962) *Ujamaa-ism*, and even Tutu’s *Ubuntuism*, seem distant. These intellectuals-

cum- politicians were acutely aware of the problem of ‘derivative’ intellectualism (Žák 2014), an issue that would still pre-occupy postcolonial scholars a generation later (Bhabha 1994; Chatterjee 1986; Mbembe 2001). Honourable as they maybe, recently renewed efforts across different disciplines in African studies, to validate ‘local intellectuals’, ‘vernacular intellectualisms’, or even ‘ethnographic theory’,² still risk encapsulating or ‘othering’ particular forms of intellectual engagement into the ‘local’, to become ‘good to think with’ for intellectual work done ‘elsewhere’, figuratively and socially as well as (or maybe more than) geographically. The ‘southern’ origins of ‘northern’ intellectual regimes can and should be revealed to question the very premises of such spatialized/temporalized differentiations, and to acknowledge and explore the *consequential* co-evalness, historicity, coexistence and contemporaneity of multiple intellectualisms, epistemologies and ontologies.

This volume, like the Comaroffs’ intervention, is not the first, nor last, to make this important point. But acknowledgment still does not amount to intellectual levelling, and the questions that African studies asks largely continue to be pre-figured and pre-dominated by (and usually take place in) ‘the North’, how/where-ever that ‘concrete abstraction’ is configured; and African theory-making continues to be relegated to the ‘localism’ of ‘raw’ data, of cultural/historical specificity, or ontological alterity, rather than engaged with for the critical challenges it might offer. The truth is we are all complicit, and African studies’ ‘crisis of legitimacy’ demands a much more profound kind of ‘levelling’ than writing workshops, shared funding and resources, and inter-continental, cross-institutional partnerships could ever afford. Likewise African archaeology cannot be saved from its precarious positionality by ‘ethno-’ or ‘indigenous’ archaeology; nor can anthropology by ‘ethnographic theory’

² See for example the ‘Local Intellectuals strand’ of the journal *Africa*, (available at: <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayJournal?jid=AFR>, accessed 6/12/14); or *HAU: The Journal of Ethnographic Theory* (available at: <http://www.haujournal.org>, accessed 6/12/14).

or ‘ontography’.³ We have to think harder in the subjunctive mood, and be open to more contingent possibilities if a new kind of ‘Afro-centrism’ in African studies and African archaeology and anthropology is to be realised to its full potential.

Anthropology, archaeology and the ethics of stuff?

Despite this gloomy outlook, in fact, as the editors point out, African archaeologists have long been developing their own ‘theories about the past that do not necessarily follow the Western theoretical progression of culture history: processualism: postprocessualism, but rather work different paths within a common language’ (p.8?). Furthermore, I sense we may be at a moment in the relationship between anthropology and archaeology that could offer another way out of the current impasse. Let me explain.

If in archaeology arguing by ‘analogy’ has been one of the increasingly problematic aspects of the ‘turn to meaning’ heralded by ‘postprocessualism’ (see Wynne-Jones, this volume), then this is perhaps mirrored in anthropology by a growing question mark about the status of ‘metaphor’ in ethnographic analysis and anthropological ‘theorising’. Both are the result of the so-called ‘material turn’. Yet one of the oddities of the relationship between anthropology and archaeology is what this turn to materiality means for each discipline. If ‘materiality’ has indeed moved archaeology ‘towards explanations that favour aspects of meaning, stressing the discursive relationship between objects and the people with which they are entangled’ (Wynne-Jones, this volume p.??), and is thereby an obvious extension of postprocessualism’s focus on the webs of meaning through which the archaeological record is constituted; in anthropology the turn to ‘materiality’ is a decidedly ‘post’

³ See discussion of the introduction to Henare et al. (2007) between Martin Holbraad and Daniel Miller, available at: <http://www.materialworldblog.com/2006/12/thinking-through-things/>, accessed 6/12/14.

postmodernist move questioning the obsession with social constructivism and the politics of representation that has often left the stuff and materials of things mute and passive. For anthropology, the real challenge thrown up by materiality is less the search for a 'symmetry' or reciprocity between pre-made 'objects' and 'subjects' (cf. Miller 2005) in 'networks of meaning' (Wynne-Jones this volume, p??), but rather the shifting networks of efficacious actants through which 'objects' and 'subjects' are constituted or 'purified' (Latour 1993) in the first place, across an emergent nexus of matter and meaning. The issue for social anthropology, therefore, is not so much deepening our understanding of the shifting relationships of meaning tying people and objects in mutual entanglement, but rather how to engage with the complex and contingent, enabling and constraining affordances of materials (Ingold 2007) and stuff in these fraught and fractured relationships. As Pinney (2005) and others (Filippucci et al. 2012) have pointed out, this is more about the excessive potentiality of stuff or the 'torque of materiality' (Pinney 2005: 270) through which meaning-making gains contingent traction and salience than about the (easy or not) mutual dependencies of objects and subjects.

This may seem like a rather fine and minute distinction, but within it are contained the different broad orientations of social anthropology and archaeology, and I suggest, the potential for an increasingly productive and 'symmetrical' relationship between them. If for anthropology the meaningful and contested social constitution of objects is an obvious point of departure, while engaging with the excessive potentialities of stuff presents a problem, then for archaeology with its long legacies of digging, sorting, touching and commenting on the forms and materials of 'objects', it is not the stuffiness of things but the excessivity of multiple, contingent, socially constituted meanings which presents the challenge. In short, while anthropology has a

problem with the indeterminacies of stuff but not with the politics of meaning, archaeology struggles with the indeterminacies of meaning but is more comfortable with the sensual excessivity of stuff. There is much here that I suspect has to do with how anthropologists and archaeologists go about their work. Very crudely, while archaeologists are diggers who handle objects, materials and things, anthropologists talk to and ‘hang out’ with people. Both are increasingly involved in questions about the uneasy relationalities, entanglements and mutual dependencies of matter and meaning provoked by the ‘material turn’, but these different orientations mean they approach the problem from opposite directions.

Of course these are rudimentary characterizations, and in reality the theoretical and practical orientations of archaeologists and anthropologists are not so neatly or drastically divided. Much depends, I suppose, on where any individual is situated between anthropology’s (or archaeology’s) centrifugal/petal tensions. But let me focus here, in closing, on what opportunities these different orientations on the same problem might allow for archaeological/anthropological relations, and what they might suggest for the possibility of a new ‘Afro-centrism’ in African studies. It has to do with a question of ‘symmetrical’ anthropology or archaeology, but not so much in terms of symmetry between ‘ethnographic subjects and interpreters’ (Wynne-Jones, p. 11??), or more abstractly, between ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’, but rather between people and things, thinking and doing, concepts and stuff. This is where anthropology’s ontological turn (a particular branch of materiality) does offer something rather important, as long as we side-step the dangers of ‘radical alterity’, incommensurability, and the renewed ‘Othering’ this (like ‘indigenous archaeology’) potentially involves, and focus instead on the profound uncertainties – political, social, epistemological and ontological – that form the basis of the *consequential* co-

evalness, historicity, shared coexistence and contemporaneity of multiple intellectualisms, epistemologies and ontologies (Fontein 2011).

If matter and meaning are mutually interdependent, but their intersections and entanglements are made fraught by the excessive potentiality of stuff to be reconstituted in myriad of ways not wholly dependent on ‘culture’, ‘society’, ‘history’, ‘politics’, epistemology’ or ‘ontology’, but also on the properties, qualities and affordances of material stuff (Ingold 2007), then we have to take the potentialities of stuff seriously. This can be framed as an ethical issue. Holbraad’s provocative ‘Can the thing speak?’ (2011), points to this ethical and political dimension by usefully alluding to Spivak’s canonical ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ (1988), even as it inevitably betrays anthropology’s continuing discursive, meaning-centred pre-occupations. If postprocessualism made archaeology ‘more like’ symbolic, meaning-centred and ethnographically-informed anthropology, then the material turn should perhaps demand that anthropology learn something from archaeology’s long history of practical, tactile and sensuous engagements with the stuff of stuff. In this formulation archaeology’s unique strength lies not so much in its approach to the past – something that with the ‘memory’ and ‘heritage’ boom everyone seems to be involved with now – but rather its approach to material. This is where a more ‘symmetrical’ relationship between anthropology and archaeology could emerge.

But the demand to take stuff seriously on its own merits would also require that the emic-situatedness of archaeology be acknowledged, traversed and transcended (Fontein 2010). The material engagements involved in the production of ‘typologies’ for culture history approaches, ‘explanations’ for processualism, and ‘webs of meaning’ of postprocessualism open some doors to material’s excessive potentialities, but the demand to take stuff seriously would equally apply to all sorts

of 'other ways' in which stuff is encountered and meaningfully constituted: performative, sensual, tactile, perceptive and imaginative. The crucial caveat is that while all these different ways of encountering and constituting the material might open us up to the horizon of stuff's excessive potentialities, ultimately this horizon cannot be delineated by anything other than the otherness of stuff itself. In the face of this profound kind of alterity and uncertainty both the 'radical alterity' of 'indigenous archaeology' and the emic-situatedness of archaeological theorising at large dissolve in the shared ontological uncertainties of intellectual and practical co-existence in and with the world. For African studies more broadly then, perhaps the possibility of a new 'authentic' 'Afro-centrism' to overcome its crisis of legitimacy in a way that neither replicates older social, cultural and political fault lines, teleologies and boundaries, yet still fosters the possibility of radical alternative ways of thinking and doing, lies in an ethical and humble approach to things, materials and the world we are all part of. And in the end, there is nothing exclusivist or 'othering' about this kind of 'Afro-centrism' at all, rather it presents the basis upon which African ways of being and thinking in all their forms and contexts can take their rightful place not just in African studies but the world at large.

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